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# Indian Spirituality

as experienced by the French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan (1913-1980)

## Eamon Maher

The writer is a lecturer in Humanities in the Tallaght Institute of Technology, Co. Dublin. His translation of Jean Sullivan's memoir of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* was published by Veritas, Dublin 2000.

Jean Sullivan (a *nom de plume* for Joseph Lemarchand, a diocesan priest who devoted himself exclusively to writing at the beginning of the 1960s) is largely unknown outside of his native France. Even in that country he doesn't receive the recognition he deserves. The manner in which his novels, short stories and essays deal with Christian dilemmas was ahead of its time, which meant that the literary Establishment in France had difficulty situating him. He was totally different from the Catholic novelists, Bernanos and Mauriac, because when he began writing the spiritual mood in France had changed perceptibly from the 1920s and 30s when they wrote their best works. Organised religion was very much on the wane when Sullivan came on the scene. Existentialism was to be the dominant force of the 1960s as the full horror of the second World War began to seep in. Existence appeared absurd. How could any loving God have permitted the suffering and death of so many innocents, people asked? And yet there were still many who were searching for traces of this God, albeit for the most part outside of mainstream religion.

There was a fascination with Eastern spirituality, which appeared exotic and totally different from what passed for religious practice in the West. The Beatles travelled to India and had their spiritual guru there. The Cistercian, Thomas Merton, was also a great fan and a regular visitor to Asian countries – he actually died in Thailand in a freak accident. Jean Sullivan was one of a long line of searchers who made their way to India. He went to the ashram of Abhishiktananda, a French Benedictine whose real name was Henri le Saux and who decided to try to live as a Christian Hindu monk. Le Saux became fascinated with the Hindu emphasis on inner calm and meditation as a means of prayerful communication with God. He adopted the Indian mode of dress (*cavi*, the long one piece clothing) and went so far down the path of Hinduism that some questioned whether or not he could really be called Christian.

Sullivan underwent a conversion on the banks of the river Kavery (which flowed alongside the ashram) and afterwards he posited the view that the West was the Third World when it came to spirituality. The West looked down on the East because the people there had fewer televisions, less wealth, less technological know-how. It failed to appreciate that these things counted for little or nothing when placed in the context of eternity. On his return from India, Sullivan's half-brother, Maurice Récan, had difficulty recognising Sullivan when he

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went to collect him at the airport. He stated that he was a 'different man.' Clearly, a transformation had taken place. But, rather than moving him away from his Christian faith, Sullivan's time in India deepened it and made him appreciate more fully the virtues of poverty and humility on which Christianity is based.

I believe that the passage I supply below, which describes his arrival at the ashram and his first experience of life within its confines, will be of interest to the readers of *Spirituality*. In Ireland at the moment, the diminution in the number of people committed to organised religion does not mean that the interior quest has stopped. People are finding alternative ways of communicating with God. They are communing with nature, going to spend time reflecting in cottages in Glendalough, doing pilgrimages to Loch Derg and Croagh Patrick. An indication of the level of interest in things spiritual in this country can be seen also in the unprecedented interest aroused here by the visit of the relics of Saint Thérèse. I believe that the passage below has a relevance for all of us who are searching for spiritual nourishment. It is part of a work in progress that I wish to add to my translation of Sullivan's award-winning account of the death of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (Veritas, Dublin, 2000). You will notice the self-deprecatory tone which is typical of Sullivan, his unwillingness to supply logical answers where none exists. His words are better than any summary I can supply:

'On the runway in Tiruchi there was no sign of any *cavi*, no Abhis<sup>1</sup> either. "God will take care of you. Make your own way." Abhis never took a taxi or a bus. The poor go by foot or in a cart. It was logical that I should be left to fend for myself.

'I spotted a light brown *cavi* at the entrance to a white dusty path: it was Abhis. He walked along at a brisk pace in front of me between the two grooves of the path, carrying my two suitcases in his hand, silent. I can still see the mud path with the Kavery river at the end shining like a bright blue lake, the red cart carrying green flowers that goes past us, pulled by two light grey buffaloes urged on by a bare skinned black child. There was a gate in the hedge on the left that opened on to a wood composed of mango, coconut and palm trees. Mikel, the servant, probably more like the friend, comes forward and does a Namascaram, his two hands crossed over his chest like a priest going up to the altar. Namascaram, I salute God in you. Mikel's young wife kneels down. 'A child cries. I make a sign for him to come to me with my index finger. In India everything is different: that gesture means go away and the poor child flees. All of a sudden I know that I will never forget these images that I see through an ashen light that

1. Abbreviated form of Abhishiktananda.



# Books Noticed

gives off a pale blue colour that highlights the very sharp angles on the ceiling, dismisses the world in order to allow it to penetrate the soul. These are not simply images; they are in your blood in the same way as the hidden memories of childhood, the trees, the animals, stay motionless in time. You remember the look on their faces, their names. But in the interval the bulldozers have made their presence felt; the paths are gone along with the trees. The animals have died. Everything, however, has its place in your memory. There are the trees, the stream which used to turn the small mill, the ovens in which the bread was cooked, the little wooden houses that we'd hang from the high forks of the hedgerows. My poor mother's frightened voice comes back to me, the way her face was raised towards the sky as though looking for a sign of her missing son. Whatever has become of the soft cover of my heart?

2. In Brittany

3. Bernard was a friend from Rennes university with whom Sulivan travelled a lot.

4. Sullivan had two serious road accidents. He was in a coma for some time after one of them. He was fond of driving quickly on motorbikes or in cars.

'We only come once into this world. I was born on flat ground, in a poor village, bereft of beauty<sup>2</sup>. If God the Father were to push the door to place me back in that village, it would be more beautiful than ever, like in Himlaspet, Bernard<sup>3</sup>, do you remember? I came back to the world beside Bernina, not far from Zarathoustra's rock, while climbing the Engadine mountains. This happened after a period of great pain – a false pain like all sentimental suffering. I was born to the light, later, in South Italy, after enduring serious physical injuries<sup>4</sup>. I was sensitive once more to the warmth of the world: I wanted to write again. Each time, I hope you can understand, I could hear the clamour of graces, like a torrential Alleluia... I was born in Southern Italy, at the side of a river. I know in my bones that I am walking towards the ultimate birth in the unknown for which there is no word because there is no longer either object, nor look, nor spectacle: I'm talking about our innermost being.

'When Abhis showed me to my hut that had as its only furniture a mat and a pillow that was as hard as a rock, a wash-basin – the nearest water was a hundred metres away – I was told to make do as best I could. Similarly, when I was forced to swallow the rice, the red peppers, I didn't flinch. I tend to be a bit cowardly and to take the easy way out when I'm alone but I am always courageous when there are others around. When everyone else was about to go to bed I got up. It must be pride that makes me do these things:

'Besides, I could feel the wind in the high leaning palm trees. There were some friendly monkeys in them, surprised to see another living form out at that time. Among the mango trees, others were doing the saraband dance. The Kavery river was just 50 metres away. I was in a hurry to walk alongside it.



'Why does Abhis always refer to the river in its feminine form: *la Cavéry*? In the manuals I always saw it written as *le Cavéry*. A large river is masculine in my opinion: it penetrates and enriches the soil and the sea. It is true that in Italian the sea is masculine, *il mare*... But what difference does that make! You'd think that the Kavery was a still lake. Once you get into it, however, it drags you in its current, the water lashes you as it flows along with all its bulk. One evening there is a sand bank in one spot, by morning it is over there with one white motionless bird perched on it. What do you call that white bird? You wouldn't want to forget everything. You'd like to be able to hold the world in your hand and for it to be as readable as change from your pocket. The boats are round, made out of woven water-willow on which they stretch out a tarpaulin. It's as if they're the same boats for thousands of years. The one on the far side of the river is now just a dark spot in front of the white village. From where does the pride from living beside a solemn river come?

'The women come to wash their *saris* in the river. They are called *dhobis* – washers. They bring the village laundry, rub it up against the rock which makes a sound like the flailing of crops during my youth in Brittany. The donkeys that brought the dirty washing wait for the *DHOBIS* to load them up again. They're almost like the offspring of donkeys, the most despised of animals. They're only good for the washing. It is considered a scandal to rub their noses. One should never say that Our Lord went into Jerusalem on a donkey. He'd never recover from that indignity in India. Here the son of God would always be on a horse. People swim in the river. The ashes of dead people are thrown in it.

'A *Brahman* (Hindu holy man) is washing his bronze jugs beside the water. His gestures are studied. You'd think he was performing some sort of ritual. He looks at me as I walk: one hundred steps forward, turn around, a hundred steps back. "Have you lost something?" he asks. I try to explain that I walk for the sake of walking. After all, the river is beautiful, the mountains in the mist, far away. He doesn't understand because he is already on the inside of all this, a part of the countryside. His face is peaceful under the white hair. He shakes his head with a gentle laugh, the same way as you react to a childish comment. I recognise this face: it's the same one that visited me as I was going down the mountain towards Sils-Maria. I was motionless in front of a railing that had no door. I could see sick and injured people thrown together like the painting of Jéricault depicting the rafts of the Medusa. "I walk for the sake of walking, I say. I am thinking..." "Do you believe that thought comes from heating up your blood? Stay still."

'He smiles again as he shakes his head. He heads off with his jugs. I wonder if I have missed something?